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DEPARTMENT FOR AF DAS YAMAMOTO

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OPPOSITION LEADERS SEEK DIALOGUE,
STRONGER INSTITUTIONS

REF: ADDIS ABABA 01319

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a meeting with the Charge May 10, opposition leaders and the moderate diaspora organization Voice of Reason discussed the need to continue dialogue with the EPRDF-led government. Voice of Reason representatives claimed that only a small (but vocal) portion of the diaspora are hardliners. The Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) wants government funding for political parties. END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION LEADERS FAVOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE WITH RULING PARTY

¶2. (SBU) Mesfin Ayelu, member of the moderate diaspora group Voice of Reason, said the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States is sharply divided over the current political situation in Ethiopia. Mesfin told the group that while the bulk of the diaspora believe in peace and a nonviolent way forward, a small number of vocal diaspora hardliners exist. He recommended that opposition leaders work together in Ethiopia and focus on the internal political landscape.

¶3. (SBU) United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF) chair Beyene Petros agreed with Mesfin and told the group that "all of us" contributed to the political problems facing the country. He continued by encouraging the group to find strategic and well-planned ways to engage with the government. Beyene said opposition parties should look for "useful" concessions in its relationship with the GOE. On the other hand, UEDF member Merera Gudina said he was less optimistic than his colleague Beyene and warned that Meles' continued "control of the internal situation" would create a diaspora-funded conflict and foster alliances between the CUDP and insurgency groups, like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

¶4. (SBU) CUDP chairperson Temesgen Zewdie said he was committed to nonviolence and wanted to focus on institution building. He commented that the opposition parties should start a dialogue amongst themselves to find common ground and invited those at the meeting to take part.

CUDP: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

¶5. (SBU) Temesgen told Charge that his party's priorities included consolidating its position within parliament and securing a financial foundation for the organization. Temesgen explained how the CUDP's May 10 walkout from parliament was a protest against the government's decision to appoint an Addis Ababa caretaker administration (reftel). Temesgen noted that the government was partially responsible for the CUDP's failure to take over Addis Ababa, given that it had imprisoned and harassed some electees. The government, Temesgen argued, should have encouraged and

empowered the CUDP to take over the city. Instead, Temesgen added, the government went "by the book," which precluded an ability to take over the city.

¶16. (SBU) CUDP city council electee Ayele Chamiso reflected on the CUDP's long, difficult journey, but said re-registering the party was a success. Ayele spoke of continuing harassment of CUDP members and presumed sympathizers in the business community, but said the political situation is a "bit better than before." He reiterated that the party cannot forget its members in jail and must strive to abide by their objectives, but United Ethiopian Democratic Party-Medhin (UEDP-Medhin) chair Lidetu Ayalew was skeptical about the new and old CUD parties being one and the same. He told the Charge that he accepted the new CUDP as a political party and looked forward to working with it as the largest parliamentary opposition group, but sided with the National Electoral Board in drawing a distinction between the CUDP new political party and the CUD leaders in jail. Temesgen objected saying that there were indeed strategic differences between the old and new CUDP, namely the decision to take seats in parliament and the city council, but said the new CUDP has used the same charter, principles and organizational documents as the old CUDP.

¶17. (SBU) Temesgen told the Charge that the CUDP intends to continue its reorganization effort by opening new offices. He said the party is hampered, however, by lack of funding. Temesgen explained that the government must allocate money in the budget for political parties. Otherwise, he said, parties would not survive or they would be forced to turn again to sources of funding outside of Ethiopia.

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